

Commentary

On the Horizon: That Christmas Problem

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That the celebration of Christmas in the United States, especially in the public schools, has long offered a problem to the sensitivity of many Jews, for religious and other reasons, is well known. That it offers similar problems to non-Jews is not so generally known. If Jews are concerned, among other things, with limiting the encroachment of religious doctrine where they feel it does not belong, and properly "integrating" Chanukah with the season's prevailing atmosphere, non-Jews are no less troubled about reconciling the heavy seasonal note of materialism with the spiritual one. Melvin Landsberg sketches some of the concerns and alarms that represent the sharper prickles of the holly, but offers no final answers, except as he seems to suggest, perhaps too daringly, that somehow American civilization will survive the inter-group conflicts surrounding the December holiday season.

While the awkwardness with which they once again confront Christmas is not the most desperate problem faced by American Jews in 1954, it yields to few in complexity. Should one refuse to don a Santa Claus costume for fear of marring the unobtrusive dignity of Chanukah? Can one make such distinctions as preferring a card offering "Season's Greetings" to one wishing "A Merry Christmas"? Can one, on the other hand, feel justified in detecting a tinge of the sinister in certain clergymen's denunciations of "godless department stores" for their "corruption of Christmas"? In short, how can one resist the almost irresistible appeal of Tiny Tim and yet avoid being cast in the role of Scrooge?

Neither Jews nor even Americans as a group are unique in their bewilderment. In the towns and cities of Ireland, laments a correspondent of the Catholic magazine *America*, Christmas gives rise to an orgy of buying and selling. At Dijon, France, in 1951, two hundred and fifty children hanged an effigy of Santa Claus on the huge wrought-iron gate of St. Benigne Cathedral. Afterwards they lowered Santa and burned him, white beard and all. The next day another effigy of Santa Claus appeared on the roof of Dijon's City Hall, amid cheers of several thousand Frenchmen. Why? French Communists and Socialists, who are strongly anti-clerical, defend the public schools, where Santa Claus has strong support. In Catholic schools, the children ignore Santa; they build little manger scenes at Christmas time.

Interestingly enough, Jews living in most parts of the United States before 1850 would have had rather less of a problem than today. Christian clergymen carried the brunt of the early attack on Christmas. To many Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists it was a Popish holiday full of heathen survivals, with no basis in Biblical chronology. Christmas trees and greenery ought not, these Protestants believed, to be found in a truly Christian home.

People who did not "keep Christmas"—and some who did—gave New Year's gifts. In fact, New Year's Day, with its custom of visiting, long overshadowed Christmas in many sections of the country. On the first of January, a gentleman was expected to call on his lady acquaintances; the practice (the origin of which was claimed by both New York and New England) spread far and wide, and was the marvel of Europeans. A British visitor wrote in 1838: "The day is made a complete holiday, and the stores and shops are almost as generally closed as on Sunday. All the ladies of the family rise early, dress for the day, and immediately repair to their dressing rooms, to receive the visits of their male friends . . . it is the only day of the year, perhaps, in which no lady is seen out. . . . As early as nine o'clock the visits of the gentlemen commence; and as these are all dressed in their best, the streets and squares present a most animated appearance. . . ."

When New Year's Day fell on a Sunday, it was postponed until the following day; when it came on a Saturday, many an unhappy Jew had to decide between observing the Sabbath and making these visits. Nevertheless, Jews had good reason to be thankful for January 1—as the New York *Times* observed in 1856, in an article called "What the Jews Think of New Year's." To his Jewish fellow citizens, the writer noted, New Year's Day, with its accompanying practice of giving gifts, was a blessed institution. In other countries they had either to celebrate Christmas or disappoint their children; neither course endeared their ancient faith to rising generations of Israelites. In New York, Jews could give their presents at New Year's, and thus avoid "both horns of a dilemma."

Nevertheless, he noticed, many Jews, particularly those from Germany, did not avail themselves of the privilege, but clung to their old customs and continued to give presents on Christmas Eve. One could hear their little ones, he reported, talking of the good "Christ-child" as reverently as if they had been born, baptized, and brought up in the Christian faith. But the Jewish families of long standing in the city universally celebrated New Year's in preference.

American newspapers were recording in 1875 that the custom of New Year calling was on the wane. By then Christmas had become something of a national event. New immigrants from Northern and Central Europe had introduced their elaborate Yule into America (the Christmas tree began to spread over the United States in the 1830's). Also, doctrine had waned in importance among Protestants, and they felt freer to adopt the day as a children's holiday. Protestant Sunday schools often made Christmas a Santa Claus, candy, and fir tree event, but as time went on they began stressing its religious significance. Many families took in trees and gave gifts to gratify the children,

and then joined in the fun for its own sake.

As Christmas grew in popularity, the Jewish press began to report a revival of interest in Chanukah. In 1863 the *Jewish Messenger* congratulated a club for holding a fancy dress ball in honor of the festival. Too frequently the holiday was commemorated by feeble candle light in the synagogue or in the home, it complained—a joyless affair, a cold ceremonial. Two decades later, the *American Hebrew* remarked that an enthusiastic observance of Chanukah had grown up within recent years. It observed, significantly, that the day was by general consent devoted to the younger element, and might be called the “children’s festival,” for gifts and treats and amusements made up the program of the week. In 1890 a paper again spoke of Chanukah as increasingly a children’s day and an occasion for kindliness.

The Jewish community, however, was determined to keep Chanukah distinctly Jewish. When, in 1883, a St. Louis rabbi, whose congregation was “the richest and most influential” in St. Louis, suggested that American Jews should thereafter celebrate Chanukah on Christmas Day, he found himself the object of the type of vilification usually reserved for the Russian Czar. The *American Hebrew* wondered how so able a man could deviate from all the established lines of rational thought. The *Messenger* declared that the people were tiring of the eccentricities of radical rabbis, of a Judaism stripped of everything Jewish. The next suggestion, it snorted, would be the coalescence of Passover with St. Patrick’s Day.

Christmas trees were an ever present source of contention among Jews. A tree was featured at a special Chanukah service held in a temple in 1879. (One hears of a “Chanukah bush” about this time; no doubt it was crowned by a Star of David.) Families brought trees into their homes, sometimes using the closeness of Chanukah to Christmas as an extenuation, and sometimes pointing to the tree as a sign of emancipation—much to the continuing annoyance of the *Messenger*, which charged that these same non-sectarians despised purely Jewish ceremonies and festivities. Grace Goldin has recorded (COMMENTARY, November 1950) something of the agonizing uncertainty that overcomes Jewish parents every winter in a small midwestern city when—after years of building up the celebration of Chanukah to compete with Christmas—they watch the Jewish festival approximate the Christian one, with blue and white merely replacing red and green. “Not so different from Christmas after all,” beams a Christian neighbor.



Jewish religious leaders and newspapers have long reminded Jews that Christmas was traditionally a time of terror for their people. One paper in 1882 offered a children’s feature called “Why Sophie Did Not Have a Christmas Tree.” Florrie Hart was shown remonstrating with Sophie, who was anticipating a tree with presents and wax candles: “I’ll tell you why it’s wrong for us to have a Christmas tree,” she explained, “because it shows that we are not true to our religion and forget our ancestors to whom Christmas and Easter were days of slaughter.” One rabbi, in a lecture on “Chanukah and Christmas,” given in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1892, complained bitterly about the failure of the people of the United States to resent Russian persecutions.

The *Messenger*, however, taking another tack now, protested against the “epidemic” of anti-Christmas sermons in 1889. “It is timely to remind those who preach sermons about Christmas that we are living in a land where Christianity is a living conviction among the great majority,” it remarked, “and any harsh or ungracious allusion to its founder is wholly inexcusable and merits sharp rebuke.” Judge Irving Lehman felt obliged to tell Jews as late as 1922 that the conditions that led them to look forward to Christmas as a day of dread and fear in parts of Europe did not exist in America. He urged them to join in the general spirit of good will and to reciprocate the holiday greetings of their friends without fear of being disloyal to their own faith, provided that they remained conscious that they were Jews.



There is, without doubt, less pressure on Jews to conform in large cities than in small ones. But public school celebrations of the holiday even in New York have at times threatened to disturb inter-religious harmony. As a matter of fact, objection to such observance has a long history. "Not alone Jewish children, but their Jewish teachers as well enter into the celebration of Christmas with a zealous earnestness which, if applied to Judaism, would inevitably be productive of good results," mourned one weekly in 1882. However, when the Board of Education banned the singing of "hymns or songs of a sectarian character" in 1907, it emphasized that Christmas exercises were an exception; these were subject only to "the good judgment of principals." But in 1925 a rabbi complained that Christmas exercises (particularly, two carols) would embarrass Jewish pupils in a Far Rockaway school. The principal, ill at ease in Zion, stopped preparations for them and conferred with his superior; a division superintendent finally ordered that the program be continued. In 1947 an assistant superintendent in Brooklyn ruled that Christmas might be celebrated only as a seasonal, pre-vacation event, a rather harmless edict it would appear from its fuzziness. But angry protests and one wild charge of an insult to the Christian religion followed. Superintendent of Schools William Jansen announced that the singing of carols was entirely up to school principals, teachers, and children. When newspaper reporters asked him whether his statement was a revocation of the ban, he answered: "If you want to put it that way you can, but I don't know whether it is or not"

The policy of the Board is now, according to one spokesman, not to have a policy; the schools plan programs according to the interests of their pupils—whether on Easter, Rosh Hashanah, or Halloween. As for distinguishing between celebration and indoctrination—"ah, fortunately, people are a bit ashamed to show bad will during a season of good will."

In 1946 a columnist for the New York *Times* spoke of what seemed to many people a possible solution—joint Christmas-Chanukah programs. They were being held throughout the country; the National Conference of Christians and Jews had even reprinted the text of one school pageant, "A Festival of Lights." But it is now apparent that the programs have strong opposition. Catholics condemn them as a sign of "indifferentism," and many Protestants and Jews agree. Joint observances, some Jewish groups charge, magnify Chanukah far beyond its importance and make it resemble Christmas more than ever before. ("The themes of these two holidays . . . are related to each other only by the coincidence of calendar. . . ." complained the *Jewish Advocate* in 1949, and the Catholic *Pilot* agreed in an editorial entitled "At Long Last.") As a result, the National Conference of Christians and Jews now feels that it cannot promote the programs, though it does not object to them where no religious qualms exist. The Anti-Defamation League still makes available to schools requesting it material for a Chanukah-Christmas celebration, but for "intercultural educational" purposes only, as a spokesman put it, not for any sort of religious program. At the opposite pole is the Synagogue Council of America, which will have nothing to do with combined observance for any purpose. The joint Christmas-Chanukah observances, however, continue to be popular in big cities, and they are not unknown elsewhere. On the other hand, acts barring religious carols of any denomination from the schools are very rare.

It is clear that the participation of Jews in the celebration of Christmas resembles that of many Protestants years ago. The Christmas tree, for instance, was not received in America as primarily a religious symbol; to those for whom the day had no religious importance, it provided a new occasion for social festivities, particularly "for the children." But the analogy with the experiences of Protestant dissenters dissolves at a crucial point: Christians easily cross the vague line between social and religious celebration. The Sunday schools of Protestant sects, we have noted, have increasingly treated the day as a holy one, and almost all Christian clergymen declaim against Christmas being observed as merely a day of gifts, tinsel, newspaper buncombe, and fiscal reckonings. The religious attitude may spread even while the day retains its national character. It was Franklin D. Roosevelt, while announcing in 1942 that all war plants would be stilled on Christmas Day only, who said: "So Christmas becomes the only holiday in all the year: I like to think that this is because Christmas is a holy day."

One need scarcely conclude that Christmas, both here and abroad, is primarily a Christian problem. Fashions shift even in holiday celebrating, and if Americans ever decide to make Christmas mainly a day of meditation, they will surely leave a good number of Jews wondering what to do about their trees and gifts.
